

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS
AUSTIN DIVISION**

ERIK PATTON STEARNS,

Plaintiff,

v.

MEDICREDIT, INC.,

Defendant.

CIVIL COMPLAINT

CASE NO. 1:17-cv-01206

DEMAND FOR JURY TRIAL

COMPLAINT

NOW comes ERIK PATTON STEARNS (“Plaintiff”), by and through his attorneys, Sulaiman Law Group, Ltd. (“Sulaiman”), complaining as to the conduct of MEDICREDIT, INC. (“Defendant”), as follows:

NATURE OF THE ACTION

1. Plaintiff brings this action for damages pursuant to the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act (“FDCPA”) under 15 U.S.C. §1692 *et seq.*, the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (“TCPA”) under 47 U.S.C. §227 *et seq.*, and the Texas Debt Collection Act (“TDCA”) under Tex. Fin. Code Ann. § 392 *et seq.* for Defendant’s unlawful conduct.

JURISDICTION AND VENUE

2. This action arises under and is brought pursuant to the FDCPA and TCPA. Subject matter jurisdiction is conferred upon this Court by 15 U.S.C §1692, 47 U.S.C §227, 28 U.S.C. §§1331 and 1337, as the action arises under the laws of the United States. Supplemental jurisdiction exists for the state law claim pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §1367.

3. Venue is proper in this Court pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §1391 as Defendant conducts business in the Western District of Texas and a substantial portion the events or omissions giving rise to the claims occurred within the Western District of Texas.

PARTIES

4. Plaintiff is a 45 year old natural person residing in Austin, Texas, which is located within the Western District of Texas.

5. Plaintiff is a “person” as defined by 47 U.S.C. §153(39).

6. Defendant is a collection agency focused exclusively on medical and healthcare debts with its headquarters located in St. Louis, Missouri. Defendant is registered at 1999 Bryan Street, Suite 900, Dallas, Texas, and makes collection calls in all states.

7. Defendant is a “person” as defined by 47 U.S.C. §153(39).

8. Defendant acted through its agents, employees, officers, members, directors, heirs, successors, assigns, principals, trustees, sureties, subrogees, representatives and insurers at all times relevant to the instant action.

FACTS SUPPORTING CAUSES OF ACTION

9. The instant action arises out of the nature of Defendant’s attempt to collect upon a medical debt said to be owed by Plaintiff (“subject consumer debt”)

10. In mid-2016, Plaintiff began receiving calls to his cellular phone, (512) XXX-4536, from Defendant.

11. At all times relevant to the instant action, Plaintiff was the sole subscriber, owner, and operator of the cellular phone ending in 4536. Plaintiff is and always has been financially responsible for the cellular phone and its services.

12. Defendant has mainly used the phone number (800) 823-2318 when placing calls to Plaintiff's cellular phone, but upon belief, it has used other numbers as well.

13. Upon information and belief, the above referenced phone number ending in 2318 is regularly utilized by Defendant during its debt collection activity.

14. Upon answering phone calls from Defendant, Plaintiff has experienced a pre-recorded message before being connected with a live representative.

15. Upon speaking with Defendant, Plaintiff is informed that it is acting as a debt collector attempting to collect upon the subject consumer debt.

16. Plaintiff informed Defendant that he was indigent and unable to make payment.

17. Due to Defendant's unwillingness to understand Plaintiff's financial situation, Plaintiff demanded that Defendant stop contacting him.

18. Despite Plaintiff's demands, Defendant continued to persistently place collection calls to Plaintiff's cellular phone up through the summer of 2017.

19. Plaintiff has received not less than 43 phone calls from Defendant since asking it to stop calling.

20. Frustrated over Defendant's conduct, Plaintiff spoke with Sulaiman regarding his rights, resulting in expenses.

21. Plaintiff has been unfairly and unnecessarily harassed by Defendant's actions.

22. With the goal of specifically addressing Defendant's conduct, Plaintiff has expended approximately \$67.00 to purchase and maintain an application on his cellular phone to help quell Defendant's calls. However, the communications have continued.

23. Plaintiff has suffered concrete harm as a result of Defendant's actions, including but not limited to, invasion of privacy, aggravation that accompanies collection telephone calls,

emotional distress, increased risk of personal injury resulting from the distraction caused by the never-ending calls, increased usage of his telephone services, loss of cellular phone capacity, diminished cellular phone functionality, decreased battery life on his cellular phone, and diminished space for data storage on his cellular phone.

COUNT I – VIOLATIONS OF THE FAIR DEBT COLLECTION PRACTICES ACT

24. Plaintiff repeats and realleges paragraphs 1 through 23 as though full set forth herein.

25. Plaintiff is a “consumer” as defined by 15 U.S.C. §1692a(3) of the FDCPA.

26. Defendant is a “debt collector” as defined by §1692a(6) of the FDCPA, because it regularly use the mail and/or the telephone to collect, or attempt to collect, delinquent consumer accounts.

27. Defendant identifies itself as a debt collector, and is engaged in the business of collecting or attempting to collect, directly or indirectly, defaulted debts owed or due or asserted to be owed or due to others. Defendant identifies itself as a debt collector and has been a member of the Association of Credit and Collection Professionals since 2007.¹

28. The subject debt is a “debt” as defined by FDCPA §1692a(5) as it arises out of a transaction due or asserted to be owed or due to another for personal, family, or household purposes.

a. Violations of FDCPA §1692c(a)(1) and §1692d

29. The FDCPA, pursuant to 15 U.S.C. §1692d, prohibits a debt collector from engaging “in any conduct the natural consequence of which is to harass, oppress, or abuse any person in connection with the collection of a debt.” §1692d(5) further prohibits, “causing a telephone to ring or engaging any person in telephone conversation repeatedly or continuously with intent to annoy, abuse, or harass any person at the called number.”

¹ <http://www.acainternational.org/search#memberdirectory>

30. Defendant violated §1692c(a)(1), d, and d(5) when it continuously called Plaintiff after being notified to stop. Defendant called Plaintiff at least 43 times after he demanded that it stop. This repeated behavior of systematically calling Plaintiff's phone in spite of Plaintiff's demands was harassing and abusive. The frequency and volume of calls shows that Defendant willfully ignored Plaintiff's pleas with the goal of annoying and harassing him.

31. Defendant was notified by Plaintiff that its calls were not welcomed. As such, Defendant knew that its conduct was inconvenient and harassing to him.

b. Violations of FDCPA § 1692e

32. The FDCPA, pursuant to 15 U.S.C. §1692e, prohibits a debt collector from using "any false, deceptive, or misleading representation or means in connection with the collection of any debt."

33. In addition, this section enumerates specific violations, such as:

"The use of any false representation or deceptive means to collect or attempt to collect any debt or to obtain information concerning a consumer." 15 U.S.C. §1692e(10).

34. Defendant violated §1692e and e(10) when it used deceptive means to collect and/or attempt to collect the subject debt. In spite of the fact that Plaintiff demanded that Defendant cease its contacts, Defendant continued to ceaselessly contact Plaintiff via automated calls. Instead of putting an end to this harassing behavior, Defendant proceeded to contact Plaintiff in a deceptive attempt to force him to answer its calls and ultimately make a payment. Through its conduct, Defendant misleadingly represented to Plaintiff that it had the legal ability to contact him via an automated system when it no longer had consent to do so.

c. Violations of FDCPA § 1692f

35. The FDCPA, pursuant to 15 U.S.C. §1692f, prohibits a debt collector from using "unfair or unconscionable means to collect or attempt to collect any debt."

36. Defendant violated §1692f when it unfairly and unconscionably attempted to collect on a debt by continuously calling Plaintiff over 43 times after being notified to stop. Attempting to coerce Plaintiff into payment by placing voluminous phone calls without his permission is unfair and unconscionable behavior. These means employed by Defendant only served to worry and confuse Plaintiff.

37. As pled in paragraphs 19 through 23, Plaintiff has been harmed and suffered damages as a result of Defendant's illegal actions.

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff, ERIK PATTON STEARNS, respectfully requests that this Honorable Court enter judgment in his favor as follows:

- a. Declaring that the practices complained of herein are unlawful and violate the aforementioned bodies of law;
- b. Awarding Plaintiff statutory damages of \$1,000.00 as provided under 15 U.S.C. §1692k(a)(2)(A);
- c. Awarding Plaintiff actual damages, in an amount to be determined at trial, as provided under 15 U.S.C. §1692k(a)(1);
- d. Awarding Plaintiff costs and reasonable attorney fees as provided under 15 U.S.C. §1692k(a)(3); and
- e. Awarding any other relief as this Honorable Court deems just and appropriate.

COUNT II – VIOLATIONS OF THE TELEPHONE CONSUMER PROTECTION ACT

38. Plaintiff repeats and realleges paragraphs 1 through 37 as though fully set forth herein.

39. The TCPA, pursuant to 47 U.S.C. § 227(b)(1)(iii), prohibits calling persons on their cellular phone using an automatic telephone dialing system ("ATDS") without their consent. The TCPA, under 47 U.S.C. § 227(a)(1), defines an ATDS as "equipment which has the capacity...to store or produce telephone numbers to be called, using a random or sequential number generator; and to dial such numbers."

40. Defendant used an ATDS in connection with its communications directed towards Plaintiff's cellular phone. The pre-recorded message which Plaintiff experienced during answered calls from Defendant is instructive that an ATDS was being utilized to generate the phone calls. Moreover, the nature and frequency of Defendant's contacts points to the involvement of an ATDS.

41. Defendant violated the TCPA by placing at least 43 phone calls to Plaintiff's cellular phone using an ATDS without his consent. Any consent that Plaintiff *may* have given to the originator of the consumer debt, which Defendant will likely assert transferred down, was specifically revoked by Plaintiff's numerous demands that it cease contacting him.

42. The calls placed by Defendant to Plaintiff were regarding collection activity and not for emergency purposes as defined by the TCPA under 47 U.S.C. §227(b)(1)(A)(i).

43. Under the TCPA, pursuant to 47 U.S.C. § 227(b)(3)(B), Defendant is liable to Plaintiff for at least \$500.00 per call. Moreover, Defendant's willful and knowing violations of the TCPA should trigger this Honorable Court's ability to triple the damages to which Plaintiff is otherwise entitled to under 47 U.S.C. § 227(b)(3)(C).

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff, ERIK PATTON STEARNS, respectfully requests that this Honorable Court enter judgment in his favor as follows:

- a. Declaring that the practices complained of herein are unlawful and violate the aforementioned statutes and regulations;
- b. Awarding Plaintiff damages of at least \$500.00 per phone call and treble damages pursuant to 47 U.S.C. §§ 227(b)(3)(B)&(C);
- c. Awarding Plaintiff costs and reasonable attorney fees; and
- d. Awarding any other relief as this Honorable Court deems just and appropriate.

COUNT III – VIOLATIONS OF THE TEXAS DEBT COLLECTION ACT

44. Plaintiff restates and realleges paragraphs 1 through 43 as though fully set forth herein.

45. Plaintiff is a “consumer” as defined by Tex. Fin. Code Ann. § 392.001(1).

46. Defendant is a “debt collector” and a “third party debt collector” as defined by Tex. Fin. Code Ann. § 392.001(6) and (7).

47. The subject debt is a “consumer debt” as defined by Tex. Fin. Code Ann. § 392.001(2) as it is an obligation, or alleged obligation, arising from a transaction for personal, family, or household purposes.

a. Violations of TDCA § 392.302

48. The TDCA, pursuant to Tex. Fin. Code Ann. § 392.302(4), states that “a debt collector may not oppress, harass, or abuse a person by causing a telephone to ring repeatedly or continuously, or making repeated or continuous telephone calls, with the intent to harass a person at the called number.”

49. Defendant violated the TDCA when it continued to call Plaintiff’s cellular phone at least 43 times after he notified it to stop calling. The repeated contacts were made with the hope that Plaintiff would succumb to the harassing behavior and ultimately make a payment. The nature and volume of phone calls would naturally cause an individual to feel oppressed.

50. Upon being told to stop calling, Defendant had ample reasons to be aware that it should not continue its harassing conduct. Yet, Defendant consciously chose to continue placing calls to Plaintiff’s cellular phone.

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff, ERIK PATTON STEARNS, respectfully requests that this Honorable Court enter judgment in his favor as follows:

- a. Declaring that the practices complained of herein are unlawful and violate the aforementioned statutes and regulations;

- b. Entitling Plaintiff to injunctive relief pursuant to Tex. Fin. Code Ann. § 392.403(a)(1).
- c. Awarding Plaintiff actual damages, pursuant to Tex. Fin. Code Ann. § 392.403(a)(2).
- d. Awarding Plaintiff punitive damages, in an amount to be determined at trial, for the underlying violations;
- e. Awarding Plaintiff costs and reasonable attorney fees, pursuant to Tex. Fin. Code Ann. § 392.403(b);
- f. Awarding any other relief as this Honorable Court deems just and appropriate.

Dated: December 27, 2017

Respectfully submitted,

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